

# Exploring Japanese Learners' Perceptions of Global Citizenship and Identity

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## Abstract

With the continuing push to internationalize universities across Japan and promote intercultural understanding in educational institutions, most Japanese learners have at one point or another encountered the concepts of 'globalization' and 'global citizenship'. The discussion of globalization in Japanese education policies has often involved the role of foreign language education, particularly English as a global language. Despite of the growing importance of global education, little research has looked at how Japanese learners understand the concept of global citizenship and to what extent these interpretations are reflected in their own perceived identity. This paper proposes the need to further explore the individually and collectively constructed global identities of Japanese learners based on findings from preliminary research. Qualitative data were collected from 95 Japanese university students using a survey consisting of open-ended questions. Questions addressed the learners' perceived views of global citizenship and their own perceived identity. Grounded theory was used to analyze the data. Based on these findings, future inquiries including rich data are necessary to better understand Japanese learners' perceived global identity. Furthermore, research investigating the intended curriculum for global citizenship education in juxtaposition to the received curriculum could provide practical insight for institutions.

Keywords: global citizenship, global education, identity, language learning, education policy

With the increasing number of university programs promoting the engagement of young Japanese learners in the global community, the

concept of global citizenship has become widespread on campuses across the country. Beyond the classroom, learners are implicitly and explicitly challenged with the task of understanding how the global community is interwoven into their local and individual lives. Japanese university students are left to negotiate their perceived identity with their understanding of what it means to be a global citizen. This process of negotiation begs the question of how the concept of global citizenship is interpreted by young Japanese learners and to what extent they identify with this concept.

The discussion of globalization and education in Japan suggests a direct implication of language education (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011). Bonny Norton first called attention to the lack of research investigating the relationship between social identity and language learning. She claimed, “SLA [Second Language Acquisition] theorists have not developed a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context.” (as in Block, 2007, p. 1). Despite SLA researchers’ late undertaking of identity research, the social sciences have formulated poststructuralist theoretical frameworks<sup>1)</sup> defining identity as the emerging narratives of lived experiences and manifests itself through performance, is constantly negotiated and remains fluid, not fixed (Stewart & Miyahara, 2011). The area has become increasingly relevant with the rapid changes due to globalization and the changing environment in which languages are taught and learned, thus affecting the emerging narratives of language learners.

The first section of this paper will briefly introduce past and current education policies to contextualize the role of language education in the internationalization of Japanese society. The second section will discuss

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1) See Block (2007) for details.

general issues of citizenship and identity in the Japanese context and in relation to education policies. The third section will present preliminary findings based on survey-based research. The last section will discuss these findings and provide support for the inclusion of social identity in exploring perceptions of global citizenship and some suggestions for future research.

## **Internationalization in Japan**

Attempts to prepare Japanese society for the age of globalization have introduced efforts to internationalize educational institutions across the country. Policies launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) focus on the expansion of English language programs at all levels of educational institutions. Mandating the inclusion of English activities in elementary school and improving teacher-training programs specialized in English communication skills are some plans outlined in the English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization<sup>2)</sup>. In the area of higher education, MEXT provides support mainly through three ongoing projects: 1) The Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development; 2) Global 30 Project - Establishing University Network for Internationalization; and 3) Re-Inventing Japan Project<sup>3)</sup>. Of the three projects, the Global 30 project<sup>4)</sup> is focused on the development of university degree programs and courses in English with

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2) "English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization" (MEXT) ([http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/01/23/1343591\\_1.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/01/23/1343591_1.pdf)) (accessed on 2014/11/29).

3) <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/highered/1326670.htm>

4) The Global 30 initiative, launched in 2009, was later changed to include thirteen universities. For more information see Aspinall (2013).

the purpose of attracting more international students and increasing internationalization of campuses. The Re-Inventing Japan Project provides support to universities to increase collaboration with universities in other Asian countries and the U.S. by creating a framework to assure the transfer of credits and grades for both Japanese students studying abroad and international students in designated Japanese universities. The first initiative promotes the internationalization of campuses by providing funding to universities to create programs that aim:

to overcome the Japanese younger generation's "inward tendency" and to foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field, as the basis for improving Japan's global competitiveness and enhancing the ties between nations. (MEXT, "The Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development", para. 1).

Critics of *kokusaika* or internationalization policies view them as an attempt to westernize institutions (Kubota & Mackay, 2009). The focus in many exchange programs under the umbrella of *kokusaika* is placed on the study of English, and typically emphasizes cultural exchange with inner-circle countries (i.e. USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand)<sup>5)</sup>. In addition, critics of the top-down approaches taken to implement these policies believe that the stagnation of institutions, educational norms, and national culture have inhibited the successful learning of foreign languages (Aspinall, 2013). The conceptualization of these policies and their goals generally begin at the level of the Ministry of Education, and the responsibility to develop the corresponding programs and curricula is left to local governments and institutions.

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5) For a discussion on the sociolinguistic profile of English see Kachru (1982).

## Identity, Citizenship and Globalization in Japan

Both western literature and political discourse in Japan have routinely pegged Japanese identity as finite, and Japan as a homogeneous country (Willis & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2008; Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011). Norton (2000) points out that the discussion of Japanese identity is constant in various areas of life; however, the question of expanding the definition of Japanese identity is not one for negotiation in society at large. However, Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu (2008) state that a growing body of literature is contradicting this rigid view of identity due to the lack of recognition of Japan's multicultural and transcultural landscapes. Moreover, despite the lack of nuance in the Japanese national identity narrative in political discourse, it is being negotiated through daily social interactions.<sup>6)</sup> The renegotiation of national and cultural identity inevitably leads to the discussion of Japanese citizenship.

In the liberal tradition, citizenship is a loosely committed relationship of checks and balances between the people and the state whereby the people are afforded civic, political and social rights and the state has its duty to protect such rights (Heater, 1999). If the state fails to do so, the citizen has a right to speak out and object. Citizenship in Japan follows this tradition with its declaration of rights and duties in the post-war constitution, but Japan's isolationist past along with other sociopolitical and economic forces have complicated issues of citizenship and national identity. Japanese citizenship

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6) In a recent example of such negotiations, I was speaking with a Japanese female professor at a conference in Europe and expressed relief in knowing that there was "another Japanese woman" attending the conference. The comment received a confused reaction, which then led to a discussion about my own perceived identity as a long-time resident of Japan and the Japanese professor's perceived identity as a Japanese woman.

is somewhat exclusive and often directly tied to ethnic identity. This interpretation introduces issues of equality in society and comes in conflict with the state protecting the rights of people. A recent Supreme Court ruling<sup>7)</sup> denying non-Japanese permanent residents welfare benefits stirred debate about citizenship in Japan.

Globalization further complicates the discussion of citizenship and identity in Japan. The influx of people, goods, and ideas through media, travel, and immigration has pushed the boundaries of nation states to extend civic or moral duties not only to fellow citizens but also to people in other parts of the world. Yamagami & Tollefson (2011) describe two representations of globalization expressed in elite discourses in Japan: globalization-as-opportunity and globalization-as-threat. The former representation sees globalization as an impetus to gain skills and education allowing citizens to be active in the world and be a part of the global community. This type of discourse is predominant in university promotional materials<sup>8)</sup> and tends to place English as the precursor to gaining benefits of globalization, particularly economic ones. The second representation of globalization-as-threat sees the influx of people (i.e. immigration) and the diversification of language, ethnicity and culture as problematic since it demands a revision of public policies. In essence, globalization “is a deep and troubling danger to fundamental aspects of the narrative of Japanese national identity, particularly the (alleged) homogeneity of Japan (shared

7) On July 17, 2014, the Supreme Court ruled that non-Japanese permanent residents are not eligible to receive welfare benefits. See ‘Foreign residents can’t claim welfare benefits: Supreme Court’ (<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/07/18/national/social-issues/top-court-rules-non-japanese-residents-ineligible-welfare-benefits/>) for details.

8) Yamagami and Tollefson’s analysis included a wide range of text, but they selected to focus on university promotional materials for the purpose of their research. See Yamagami and Tollefson (2011) for details.

beliefs, values and attitudes) and sense of personal safety and security” (p. 28).

Education policies put forth by MEXT resonate in part these two representations. In the three projects outlined above, the prevailing discourse is that of globalization-as-opportunity whereby higher education can prepare learners to successfully take part in global enterprises. Yet the emphasis placed on English language, particularly in elementary and secondary education, has spurred some criticism, which claims that English “takes time away from Japanese language studies and citizenship education” (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011, p.31), undermining Japanese national identity. Hence, in the MEXT pamphlet titled “Higher Education in Japan”<sup>9)</sup>, the section describing the introduction of English courses in efforts to internationalize universities includes a final sentence to reassure that “such universities still also provide substantial Japanese-language education courses” (MEXT, n.d., p. 17). Therefore, the dualistic representations of globalizations and their impact on national identity are explicitly and implicitly expressed in the outline of these education policies.

From another perspective, the development of global education policies is not solely focused on language skills. Fujikane (2003) explains that the current trends in global education are the results of preceding movements such as education for international understanding, development education, multicultural education and peace education<sup>10)</sup>. The movements promoted the idea that by understanding other people, the world becomes a better place. Shifting worldviews of “the global” during the 1990’s led to renewed

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9) “Higher Education in Japan” (MEXT) (<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/highered/1302653.htm>) (accessed on 2014/11/30).

10) See Fujikane (2003) for a discussion on the evolution of these movements.

interests in adopting policies which could account for a changing world. Fujikane explains:

The diversification of actors on the world stage is now visible, and contributes to the shift in people's views of the international. . . . This shift in the meanings of nation states and their relations with citizens and other agencies relates to the resurgence of an old aspiration: promoting universal morality through education. (p. 144)

The representation of globalization here is not shaped as an opportunity or as a threat but rather as a moral imperative toward other citizens of the world. In the purpose statement for the Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development, a direct link is made between the individually and collectively lived experiences of Japanese learners to the global community by addressing the need to overcome the “inward tendency” of Japanese learners. In the representation of *global-as-value*, there is a call to increase awareness of and responsibility to the ‘other’. In other words, individual, cultural and societal values must be reshaped to account for the diversified global stage. In promoting global education echoing this representation, the conversation of citizenship and identity in Japan will inevitably grow.

In summary, the efforts to internationalize Japanese society predominantly involve the reformation of language education policies. The role of language education in the push to create citizens who can participate in the global community introduces tensions between culture and language, and between global and local cultural forces, thus inviting the creative reshaping of identity (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). Japanese learners are faced with societal and institutional pressure to ‘belong’ to a global community, compelling them to reevaluate their identity as a language learner and as



a member of this imagined globalized community (Ryan, 2009). Therefore, Japanese learners in higher education will be faced with calls for the negotiation of their perceived identity not only as a Japanese citizen but also as a global citizen.

### **Theoretical Implications for Identity Research**

A few words should be given to address issues in identity research. Firstly, many researchers in the social sciences express concern in using “‘identity’ as a methodological tool” (Garratt & Piper, 2008, p. 80). Indeed, a discussion about cultural or ethnic identity forcibly simplifies a very complex construct. Therefore, I do not put forth any claim that interpretations of learners’ experiences and perceived identity provides a complete representation of their lived experience. I fully acknowledge that I am co-creating a narrative about Japanese learners and global citizenship. Thus, the purpose of this preliminary research is not to generalize findings, but rather engage in an ongoing dialogue, which undoubtedly will lead to more questions and further research.

Secondly, I have purposefully avoided giving a working definition of ‘global citizen’ since my questioning of the concept was the impetus for this research. Having taught English in Japan for nearly ten years, I have observed, implicitly and explicitly, many projects addressing internationalization in Japanese education. I first started questioning the intended goals, implementation, and outcomes of such projects when teaching in high schools. When I began teaching at the university level, I increasingly noticed posters for events, presentations or special courses with keywords such as ‘global citizen’, ‘global action’, and so on. Parallel

to these observations, I began to focus part of my courses on intercultural communication, which unavoidably introduced these topics into the class curriculum. However, rather than defining what these terms mean for the students, I was more concerned about how the students were interpreting these pervasive ideas. Therefore, I began informal group discussions in class asking the question “What is a global citizen?”, which led me to explore the topic a little more in depth beginning with this preliminary research. The two research questions addressed in this study are how Japanese university learners interpret global citizenship and to what extent they identify with this concept.

## **Methodology**

The participants in this study are 95 (female=25, male=70) economics majors at a university in western Japan aged between 19 and 22 years-old.

To begin addressing the research questions, a simple survey consisting of six open-ended questions and a few items to collect demographic information was created. The questions were developed using Oxfam’s publication Education for Global Citizenship (2006) to organize general components in wording questions. The survey was translated into Japanese and administered in a talk-through session with a group of six first-year students. The participants answered the questionnaire online using the university’s computer assisted learning system. They were given instructions in Japanese, and then each question was shown one at a time on the screen. Students typed their answers. The six questions were:

1. What is your general understanding of global citizenship?
2. What knowledge does a global citizen have?

3. What skills does a global citizen have?
4. What values does a global citizen have?
5. What are specific ways a global citizen acts?
6. Do you think you are a global citizen? Why or why not?

The data were compiled and translated into English. A content analysis was performed in order to find emerging themes. Since students were allowed to write as much or as little as they wanted, the sampling unit was each individual answer, and the context unit was limited to words and phrases.

## **Preliminary Findings**

Participants' general impressions of global citizenship (answers to the first question) were mainly a summary of answers to question two to four. Therefore, the data analysis focused on these three questions. The following patterns were observed in participants' answers.

### **Knowledge vs. Skills vs. Values**

In creating the survey, the questions reflected the three components outlined in Oxfam's publication *Education for Global Citizenship* (2006) : knowledge, skills, and values. In analyzing participants' answers to these questions, there was much overlap between these three conceptualized components. In other words, they are not mutually exclusive in students' understanding of these concepts. For example, answers for the second question, referring to the knowledge of a global citizen, stated that a global citizen should know foremost international/global current events, international culture and English. Answers to the third question which referred to the skills of a global citizen also predominantly reported English

language. This is not surprising since English education in Japan at the pre-university level is exam-oriented with little focus put on fluency, as many researchers and practitioners have reported. Indeed one must have knowledge of the linguistic system in order to be a skilled language user. Therefore, further inquiry may be necessary to understand the underlying ambiguity of the components used in the questionnaire.

Despite the overlapping component, a composite of a global citizen based on the frequency of answers given in each category is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

**Composite of a Global Citizen**

| Question Number | Answers Based on Frequency of Context Unit  |
|-----------------|---|
| Q2.             | <p>A global citizen knows...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• international/global current events.</li> <li>• languages, particularly English.</li> <li>• international culture in addition to Japanese culture.</li> </ul>         |
| Q3.             | <p>A global citizen can...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• communicate with people of different cultures.</li> <li>• use language well.</li> <li>• think logically.</li> <li>• be flexible.</li> <li>• show leadership.</li> </ul> |
| Q4.             | <p>A global citizen values...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• acceptance of diversity.</li> <li>• openness.</li> <li>• helping others.</li> </ul>  |

A global citizen is knowledgeable in international/global current events and languages, particularly English and knows about international culture in

addition to Japanese culture. They are skilled in communicating with people of different cultures as good language users and have other transferable skills such as logical thinking, flexibility and leadership. Their values include acceptance of diversity, openness, and helping others. The fifth question, inquiring what specific ways a global citizen acts, received quite a few vague answers such as “acts proactively”, or simply “I don’t know”.

### **Participants’ Self-perception as Global Citizens**

Table 2 shows the results in percentage values for answers to question six.

| Answer on Survey                                    | Total Number<br>of Answers in<br>Percentage Value | Reasons Provided   |
|---|---|--|
| Yes ( $n=16$ )                                      | 17  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “born a global citizen”</li> <li>• have awareness of current events</li> <li>• overseas experience</li> <li>• belief in equality</li> </ul> |
| No ( $n=63$ )                                       | 66  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of ability or skills</li> <li>• lack of interest</li> <li>• lack of awareness of global affairs</li> </ul>                             |
| No, but this may change<br>in the future ( $n=15$ ) | 16  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• future goal</li> <li>• will change with interaction with<br/>foreigners / experience abroad</li> </ul>                                      |

*Note.* Participants who gave non-applicable answers accounted for 1%.

Participants who identified as being a global citizen accounted for 17% while those who did not made up the majority at 66%. Participants who answered positively reported a variety of reasons. The reason which received the most mentions was that of innateness, or rather that we are

all “born a global citizen” as occupants of this planet. The following three reasons, having an awareness of current events, having experience living overseas, or belief in equality, were reported in equal numbers. The most reported reason for participants who answered negatively was that they did not have the necessary skills followed by not being interested in becoming one. Students who answered that they did not consider themselves global citizens yet accounted for 16%, and signaled that this status would or could change if they interact more with foreigners or went overseas. Thus, despite having a loose concept of global citizenship, participants could clearly indicate whether they identified with being a global citizen.

## **Discussion and Future Research**

Two issues are raised by these findings. First, the overlapping qualities described in answers to questions two to four reflect the ambiguity of describing a global citizen using the components of knowledge, skills, and values. Although these components may provide a framework for discussing global citizenship, a reevaluation of how they are defined may be necessary. For university learners engaged in full-time studies, there may be no deciphering between the skills and knowledge required to successfully take part in the world. Moreover, how can one decipher the values specifically linked with global citizenship versus those linked to being a local communitarian (Garratt & Piper, 2008)? This last question acknowledges that perhaps global citizenship is inherently vague conceptually. Thus, further exploration of the concept could highlight possibilities in framing it more concretely. Oppositely, an explicit view defining global citizenship as a flexible, fluid concept could allow for interesting possibilities in how learners

identify as global citizens.

Secondly, the most commonly listed reason for not identifying as a global citizen was lacking the necessary skills and awareness. This idea is reinforced with comments of students who feel that they will have some possibility to become global citizens with more experience in society and the world. According to Heater (1999), compared to the outline of the rights and duties of citizenship based on nation-states, global citizenship seems to be characterized by an idealist notion of how one should interact with their fellow world citizen. This responsibility may seem overwhelming for university learners. With 75% of participants 20 years<sup>11)</sup> of age and younger (19 years-old: n=52; 20 years-old: n=36), most learners have yet to fully experience the rights (e.g. the right to vote) or duties (e.g. paying taxes) as national citizens. Moreover, the competing interests between states may pin the rights and duties of a national citizen against those of other world citizen. This contradiction may further complicate university learners' conceptualization of global citizenship and willingness to identify as a global citizen.

This unwillingness or resistance may explain the second most common reason given by participants who do not identify with global citizenship: lack of interest. This reason may be slightly unsettling to policymakers considering the importance placed on global education in higher education. If institutions are investing resources into programs with the purpose of developing global citizens, then a closer look at how students position themselves within the concept of global citizenship may help administrators attain this goal. As mentioned, one explanation given for many failed education policies in Japan is the top-down approach in implementing them

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11) The age of majority and legal age to vote is 20 in Japan.

(Aspinall, 2013). Thus, a process of planning, implementation, and evaluation following a convergent approach may create a more nuanced description of a global citizen, allowing Japanese learners to bridge the gap between their perceived identity and that of a citizen of the world.

In order to address these issues, a qualitative approach, including rich data in the form of interviews, journal entries, and materials analysis may offer a more complete picture of global citizenship education in Japanese universities. Specifically, research investigating the extent to which intended curriculum for global education programs translate into received curriculum can help direct these programs. Aspinall (2013) remarks, “numbers alone are only a rough indication of the internationalisation of higher education and that this is as true of an individual campus as it is of a large, national system” (p. 176). Furthermore, research looking at global citizenship should allow for flexible interpretations of the global citizen and its identity in order to align itself with current theoretical frameworks viewing identity as something invented, constructed, fluid and constantly being negotiated (Block, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to explore learners’ perceptions of global citizenship and the extent that learners identify with this concept. Preliminary research showed that global citizenship may be somewhat difficult for students to interpret and that this ambiguity may limit the degree to which they identify as a global citizen. The growing importance of global education in institutions of higher education calls for inquiries that will provide insight into nuanced conceptualization of global citizenship.



The exclusion of social identity in the conceptualization of global citizenship could potentially lead to the implementation of educational programs that do not reflect the individual narratives of Japanese learners. The lack of inclusiveness in such programs could result in overly taxing students in negotiating their perceived identity with that of a global citizen. The repercussions of this challenging process could lead students to feel uninterested or unmotivated to engage in such programs. Future empirical research, particularly qualitative in nature, from the perspectives of the institutions and other stakeholders may help fill in the narrative of global citizenship education in Japan.

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